

Vergil's Fall of Troy

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My subject is appearance and reality, the tension between how things seem and how they really are, in Book 2 of Vergil's *Aeneid*. The story of the Trojan War belongs, of course, to Greek legend, and in particular to Homer's *Iliad*—which is in Greek. *But* the *Iliad* only tells the story of the "Wrath of Achilles", a spectacular episode in the tenth year of the war. True, Books 2-8 read almost like a flash-back over the whole ten years of the war. Even so, the *Iliad* gave the Wrath of Achilles pride of place among all the stories about Troy known to Greek legend: first his cold wrath against King Agamemnon for taking back the girl awarded to him as his prize of honour; and then his hot wrath against Trojan Hector for killing his beloved friend Patroclus. But that was not the end of the war—far from it. In ancient times, several other Greek epics existed, the so-called "Epic Cycle", now all lost, which traced the whole long story, from its beginnings among the gods, and the fateful Judgment of Paris, to the final sack of Troy by the Greeks through the famous strategem of the Wooden Horse; and then on to stories of how the Greek heroes returned home. Homer's *Odyssey* is such a *nostos* or "return"; and at the court of King Alcinous among the Phaeacians, the blind bard Demodocus actually begins the tale of the Wooden Horse. But it remains a fragment. Later Greek literature often alludes to the fall of Troy, and especially Greek Tragedy. There is a magnificent evocation of it in Aeschylus' *Agamemnon*. Euripides, in his two plays *Hekabe* and *Trojan Women* sees it all from the viewpoint of the defeated. But nowhere in surviving Greek literature is the story of the fall of Troy actually told.

The even books of the Aeneid

So where can we read this story? Answer: in Book 2 of Vergil's *Aeneid*—in Latin, not Greek, and (as in Euripides) from the point of view of the Trojans. Book 2 begins the series of the even-numbered books in the *Aeneid* which mark the main crises or turning-points in Aeneas' personal story: Book 2 is the Fall of Troy; Book 4, the Tragedy of Dido; Book 6, Aeneas' visit to the world beyond death; Book 8, his visit to the very site of the future city of Rome; Book 10, Turnus' killing of Pallas, who is to Aeneas what Patroclus had been to Achilles; and the masterly finale of Book 12, ending with Aeneas' much-debated killing of Turnus in vengeance for Pallas.

Not all of these even-numbered books are dark and tragic in tone. Books 6 and 8 both rise to a great vision of Roman destiny, and Book 8, though not without its ominous undertones, has in general an optimistic, almost serene sense of fulfilment and peace. **It** builds up to the description of the engravings on Aeneas' divinely wrought shield, whose final tableau depicts a triumphal procession at Rome: the peoples of the world offering gifts to the new emperor Augustus. And here we notice something very important about Vergil's vision of Rome. The peoples in the procession symbolise the length and breadth of the Empire—and here they are, all wearing national costume, speaking their own native languages, even bearing arms. Homage to Augustus and to Rome—yes; but—no humiliation, no enforced conformity.

It would make an interesting yardstick by which to measure both the realities of Roman rule, and also the theory and practice of imperialism at other times and in other places. But for our present purpose, the point is that the visions of Rome in Books 6 and 8 continue and complete the meaning of Aeneas' loss of Troy in Book 2. The end of Troy becomes, in Vergil, the beginning of Rome. **It** is at least a useful hypothesis that Vergil planned each of his 12 books internally in three sections, rather like the "acts" of a play (though, if so, he also took good care to make the acts run into each other so smoothly as often to blur the point of transition). Book

2 is a good example: Act I, ll. 1-249 (or perhaps 1-267): The Wooden Horse. Act II, ll. 250-633 (or perhaps 250-623, where the incomplete line shows that Vergil was still working on the text): The Fall of Troy.

Act II, ll. 634-804: Aeneas' Escape.

The whole story is told by Aeneas himself at Dido's royal banquet in Carthage, so it is a first-person eye-witness account. In Act I, Aeneas is indeed no more than a mute and helpless onlooker while Priam the king and all the other Trojans (except Laocoon, to his cost) are tricked by that consummate actor, Sinon, into taking the fatal horse into the city. In Act II he becomes a central figure in the last desperate resistance-only to find himself at last once again the helpless spectator of Priam's pitiful end and the final ruin of Troy. And so, in Act III, the focus of attention narrows to the fate of Aeneas' own family, as he himself recalls it.

Which is more real: appearance or reality?

Vergil knows that he is re-telling a familiar story. So right from Aeneas' opening words, he shows that he is going to pull out the big stops of grandeur and pathos:

infandum, regina, iubes renouare dolorem, Troianas ut opes et lementabile regnum eruerint Danai ...

"unspeakable suffering you command me to relive, O Queen – how Troy, her treasures and her empire, gone for ever, were overthrown by Greeks" (3-5); or again:

quis cladem illius noctis, quis funera fando explicet, aut possit lacrimis aequare labores?

"Who could conjure in words the horror of that night, the slaughter, or shed tears enough to match in suffering?" (361-2)

In modern times, he might have been speaking of the fire-storms that destroyed Hamburg and Dresden in 1944/5; had it been London, the analogy with the great imperial city would be even closer. The climax comes at the end of Act II – the vision of the gods bringing down Troy like woodcutters toppling a mighty, ancient tree. But beside grandeur and pathos, Vergil exploits another theme: the tension between appearance and reality, between how things look and how they really are. No doubt this is such a powerful motif in literature because it is so in life. It fascinates us, even when it is deeply disturbing; and particularly when we know the truth that is hidden from someone else. "O joy! The Greeks have gone!"; yes-just out of sight. The great wooden horse is rumoured to be a Greek offering a propitiation; but we already know it is an ambush. Sinon persuades the Trojans to bring it into their city. The fascination of his whole performance depends on our knowledge that it is a confidence trick. So Troy celebrates deliverance and sleeps in peace – having sealed its own doom.

Again, in the street-fighting of Act II, the Trojans try a trick of their own: they disguise themselves as Greeks; but it backfires when it deceives friends as well as foes. The very gods themselves are at work in this conflict of appearance and reality. The terrible omen of the twin snakes *seems* to prove Laocoon impious in casting his spear at the horse- just because he recognised the reality behind the appearance. Sinon's oaths appear to be crowned with complete success, whereas Panthous' priestly office avails him as little as the hallowed sanctity of an altar can protect Coroebus, or even Priam himself from the godless brutality of Pyrrhus. And then there is Rhipeus:

*cadit et Rhipeus, iustissimus unus
qui fuit in Teucris et seruantissimus aequi:*

dis aliter visum.

"So too fell Rhipeus, the one most upright man in all Troy, and most dedicated to right conduct: the gods judged otherwise." (426-8).

And all this culminates (like the grandeur and the pathos) in that moment when Aeneas' mother Venus reveals to his sight the four great gods –Juno, Neptune, Minerva and Jupiter himself- who, behind the natural appearances, are the real destroyers of Troy.

So far, what we have seen is that simple faith and hope and goodness are a pathetic illusion- while heartless self-interest, deceit and despair are in touch with reality. But now comes something unexpected. It is not only the good appearances which prove unreal, hiding a sinister reality; there are also sinister appearances which hide a hope as solid as all the despair. This theme begins with Aeneas' terrible dream of Hector – surely a portent of imminent doom. Yet it also contains (unrecognised by the dreamer at the time) the first hint of a great future (291 ff.). By the end of the Book, though still hidden from Aeneas comprehension by the anguish of losing his beloved wife, that promise is confirmed by her ghost with calm assurance.

The reality beyond the despair

Let us now watch how this is worked out in the amazing scene which begins at line 634. Aeneas returns home to rescue his family. This at least must be real, for it is the express command of his divine mother Venus. Not so, it seems. His crippled father *abnegat* "says 'no'". Vergil paints a masterly portrait of three people in despair: first, the old man, Anchises. For him, this hope of escape is a menace of exile. Behind the mask of resignation to the will of the gods, the hissing S's of his words

has mihi seruassent sedes

"they surely should have saved this city for me"

had they meant him to live on, betray a bitterness which crucially misunderstands what is happening to him at the moment. His call for his loved ones to go without him, his expectation of the enemy's "mercy" in ending it all for him, his dismissal of being left unburied as trivial- all this is not just shocking: behind its appearance of courage lies a failure to recognise reality. His stubbornness exposes his loved ones (who of course will not go without him) to annihilation.

What a way to introduce this ideal Roman father-figure! And all because he takes appearances for ultimate reality. Like father, like son. Aeneas accepts his father's choice as the reality; naturally, where the old man waits to die and turns his despair on Father Jupiter, the younger man prepares to find death in action, full of indignation towards his father who will not be rescued, and his goddess mother who sent him on this futile mission. Father and son, those by-words for *pietas*, are at one in one thing only, namely, in rebelling against it.

The one person who remains in touch with reality is a woman. Creusa physically interposes herself and their little boy between Aeneas and his selfish heroism, which would leave them here for a butchering such as he had witnessed on Priam – and had just predicted for his father also in his bid to persuade him. And then little Iulus' head bursts into flame: a symbol of light in the darkness, casting doubt on the reality of that darkness. Even now (understandably!) the first instinct of both parents is to quench that light, mistaking a promise for a menace. But the old man takes it in – and comes to himself. A moment ago, Father Jupiter was the god who had blighted

his life in its youth, and now meant him to die with Troy while his family fled. Suddenly he has become the Father who hears prayer and helps the good. Presumably Jupiter is not expected to remember-because Anchises does not remember (do we?): a divine amnesia! He is once more in touch with reality. That awful earlier moment of black unreality is now itself unreal to him.

Jupiter duly confirms this bright new reality with the requested second omen of the shooting star. The old man's maimed body rises somehow; his words are full of verbs of movement: *tollit*, *sequor*, *adsum*, *ire*. His whole thought embodies the true Roman father and patrician, self lost in family and state and in harmony with Heaven. The stage is set for that picture of the son bearing his father on his back out of burning Troy which was already proverbial in Vergil's time, and out of which he fashioned his *pious Aeneas*. It was Vergil's own touch to add to the tableau the little boy running at his side hand in hand, and the faithful wife following behind.

Throughout most of Book 2, the reality of despair triumphs over the illusion of hope. But now the reality of hope has overpowered the illusion of despair. In a sense, nothing has changed: Troy's doom is already sealed. Yet the Trojan *penates*, which symbolise this proud imperial city of the East, are being carried in the hands of Anchises to become the symbol of an even greater city in the West. The sack of Troy gives Book 2 its grandeur and its pathos; but its ultimate reality, glimpsed briefly but brightly, is that from the ashes of Troy will rise the Phoenix of Rome.

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